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B-1B test team delivering increased combat capability

by Leigh Anne Bierstine Air Force Flight Test Center Public Affairs
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Courtesy photo

Weapons loaders from the Global Power Bomber Combined Test Force make the final preparations for a munitions load onto the B-1B prior to a flight test of the bomber's Block E upgrade capabilities.

EDWARDS AFB, Calif. (AFMCNS) — Operational test experts are halfway through Block E upgrade testing here aimed at providing the B-1B Lancer with increased weapons capability and a new combat flexibility.

Developmental tests completed this summer here demonstrated the B-1B's ability to drop a joint direct attack munitions, a wind corrected munitions dispenser bomb and an unguided ballistic weapon in a single pass. In the past, the B-1B could be uploaded with only one type of weapon.

The Block E upgrade is making it possible for the aircraft to carry a combination of weapons, which allows the aircraft to address different kinds of targets in one pass.

Building on the developmental tests, operational testers with the Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center's Detachment 5 here are taking the Block E testing a step further, carrying similar test missions in a more realistic combat environment using operational support from Air Combat Command.

An operational test crew from Detachment 5 left Oct. 16 for Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, where members will demonstrate the aircraft's new weapons capability by launching from the ACC base with help from its maintenance troops and aircrews. For the past two months, 21 maintainers from Dyess, along with ACC aircrews, have been flying with the operation crew at Edwards providing realistic insight from the start.

According to Maj. Ed Offutt, a weapons systems officer with Detachment 5, testing at Dyess is key to the overall success of the B-1B upgrade.

"In deploying to Dyess, we'll be using the war fighter's tools and equipment, which makes for a very different environment," Offutt said, "We'll be using the B-1B essentially the way our operators have used it in Afghanistan but with the new capabilities of the aircraft."

Offutt said he's confident the upgrade will allow the B-1 to do a better job of meeting the military theater commanders' needs.

"Before this upgrade, the B-1B was limited in the types of targets it could address at

any one time," he said. "In the future, our B-1B crews will be able to mix and match their weapons any way they need to."

Adding the new capability to the B-1B may sound simple, but in reality it is a challenging effort for all of the test teams involved, said Capt. Heinz Huester, a Detachment 5 maintenance officer. The upgrade called for installing new hardware, computers and software on the B-1B and integrating them with the aircraft's existing equipment.

"We have to ensure that our operational users can confidently employ and maintain the aircraft with this new capability," Huester said. "Our job is to make sure it works as advertised in a combat environment."

Huester credits the work of his developmental test counterparts in the success of the upgrade testing to date. Developmental test experts, including maintenance personnel at the Global Power Bomber Combined Test Force here, conducted developmental Block E testing for more than a year-and-a-half before operational testing started. During that time, the developmental team identified and corrected hundreds of deficiencies in the hardware and software the upgrade required.

In addition, Detachment 5 operational test crews began flying with the B-1B developmental test team early in the test program to make sure they'd be up-to-speed on operating the new hardware and software systems, Heuster said. B-1B maintenance crews from the 31st Test and Evaluation Squadron and those working inside the bomber CTF at the 419th Flight Test Squadron also teamed up to make sure the aircraft was flight-ready throughout Block E testing.

"This is truly a combined test force and we have been working hand-in-hand in delivering this new capability to the warfighter," said Offutt. "We all want to make sure this is an appropriate and effective system for those who may someday use it in combat."

The flight tests at Dyess mark the midway point for the operational test portion of the Block E upgrade. Operational testing at Dyess is expected to last through mid-November with a total of eight test flights employing combinations of all three weapon types.